

THE BROAD RIVER SEA SERPENT

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Down through the years, large marine animals identified as sea serpents have been reported swimming about in the world's oceans. The true nature of sea serpents has yet to be satisfactorily explained, and the identity of these creatures is a popular topic of discussion among cryptozoologists, marine biologists, and those interested in learning more about the mysterious creatures that inhabit the deep. One of the best documented yet least studied accounts of an encounter with an animal described as a sea serpent occurred in the waters between Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, during the middle of the nineteenth century.

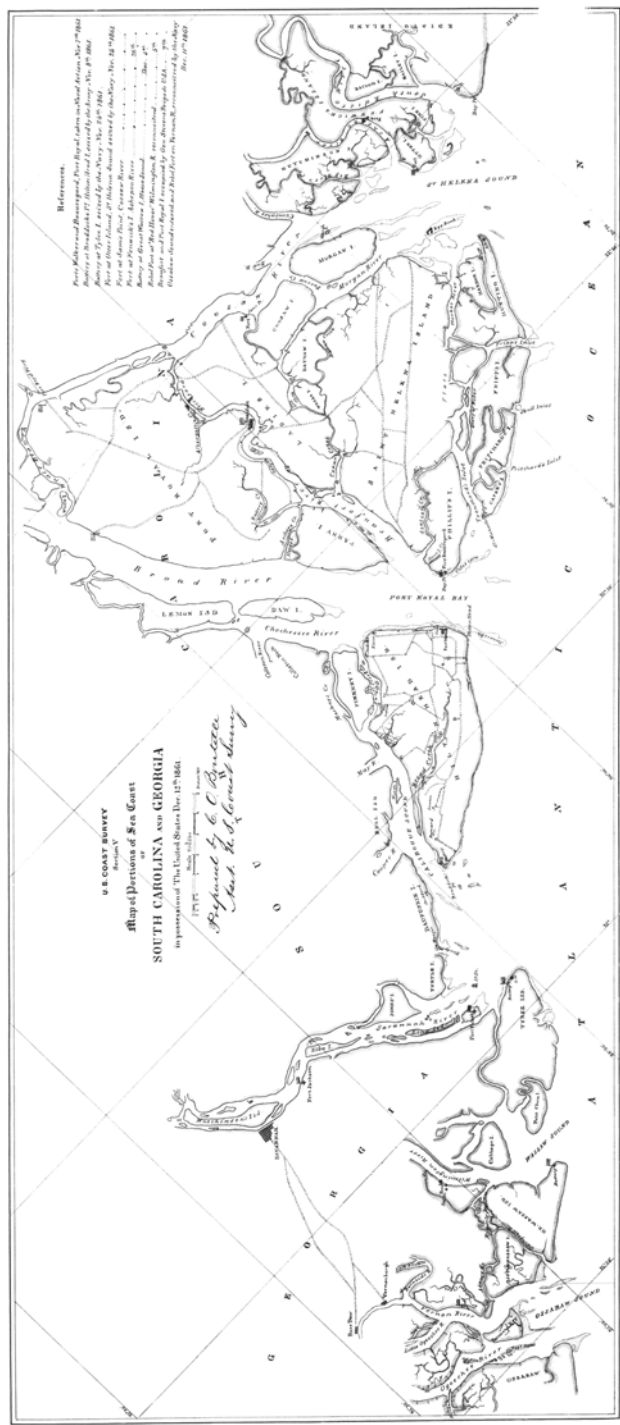
The mysterious creature was first spotted by the passengers and crew of the steamer *William Seabrook* at the mouth of Port Royal Sound late in the afternoon of Sunday March 10th, 1850. The steamer left Charleston earlier that morning on its usual run to Savannah with a stopover in Beaufort. As the steamer was passing into the sound, someone noticed something off in the distance that at first glance appeared to be a large inanimate object floating on the surface of the water. As they studied it, however, it appeared to be alive, and looked like some sort of large animal such as a whale. They pointed it out to the vessel's captain, Peleg Blankenship, who studied the object for a few moments, but could not quite figure out exactly what it was. Curious to learn more about the mysterious creature, Blankenship adjusted course to take a better look.

A correspondent from the *Savannah Daily Georgian* described what happened next. "Capt. Blankenship took a view through his

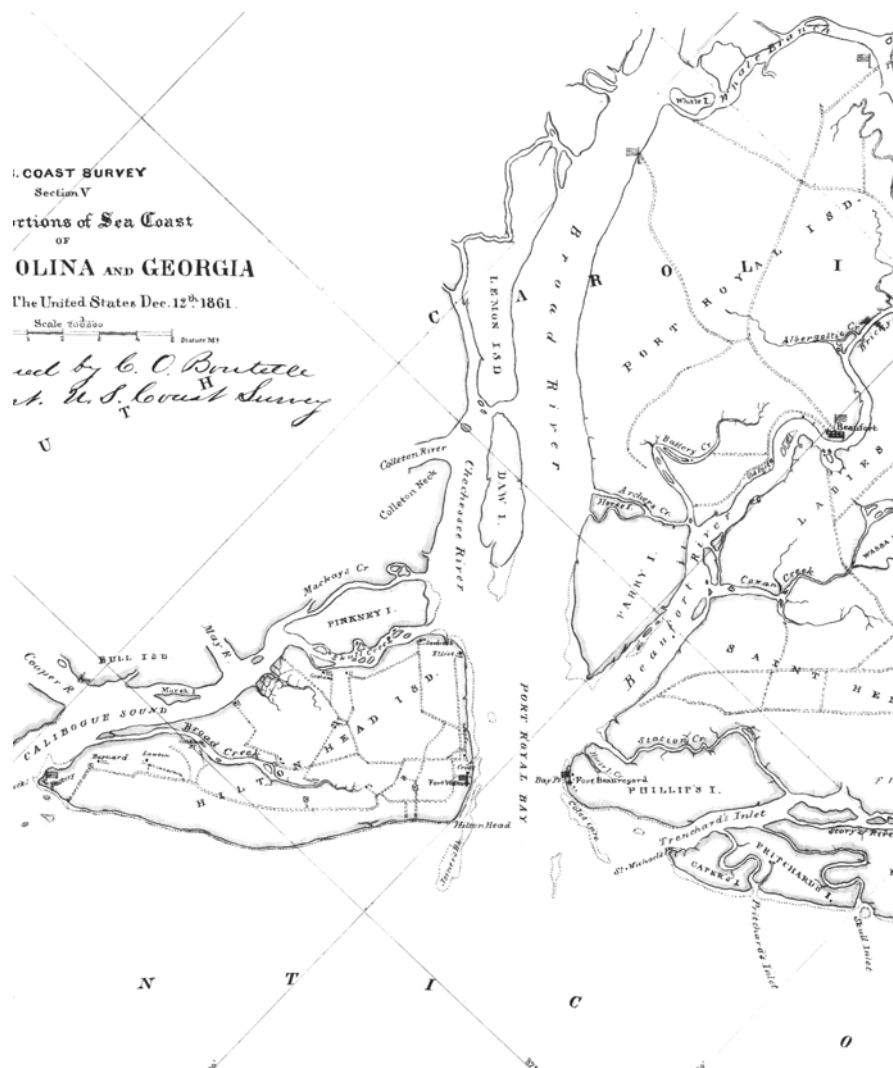
glass, and to satisfy the passengers, run a mile out of his course to get a better sight of this wonderful creature. The steamer run within thirty feet of it, when it sunk; but not until all on board had a full view of his serpentship. It was described to us as being from 125 to 150 feet in length, and portions above the water appeared to be from eight to ten feet across. From all accounts it must be the veritable Sea Serpent, from off Nahant, who is spending the winter South for the benefit of his health” (Anonymous, 1850a).

After their encounter with the strange animal, those on board the *William Seabrook* continued on their journey into Beaufort, where they offloaded passengers and cargo, and then headed on to Savannah. Once arriving there, word quickly spread in the coastal Georgia city of a sea serpent lurking nearby. The people of Georgia were accustomed to hearing such tales, as there have long been reports of mysterious creatures encountered down through the years all along the coast. There was even a report of a mysterious creature swimming up the Savannah River all the way to the falls at Augusta.

Correspondents from the local newspapers swarmed onto the scene to interview passengers and crew about their encounter. A correspondent from the *Savannah Morning News* penned the following account shortly after the incident occurred. “On Sunday afternoon last, about 5 o’clock, as the steamer *Wm. Seabrook*, Capt. Blakenship, was passing Broad River, about 30 miles North of Tybee Light, bound for this city, those on board the vessel saw at a distance of several hundred yards ahead what they at first took to be a floating log. As the boat neared it, however, they discovered it to be a living something, lying apparently still, partly submerged in the water; and as they came still closer, it assumed the appearance so often described by those who profess to have seen the Sea Serpent. The passengers and others describe it as being of a dark, muddy color, with a head somewhat resembling that of an alligator, 10 to 15 feet in length, which was entirely out of the water. The body, which described a curve as it lay in the water, discovered numerous bumps of the size of a hogshead rising out of the water, by which they were enabled to make an estimate of its length,



Broad River, map from 1861 (NOAA archives)



Broad River, close-up of 1861 map (NOAA archives)

which they state at 140 to 150 feet. Capt. Blankenship, in order to gratify his passengers and crew with the best possible view of the sea monster, made a circuit round him, passing within 20 or 30 feet of it, during which his Snakeship seemed to take no notice of the vessel. After holding himself on exhibition until the boat's crew had enjoyed a full view of him, he slowly sunk beneath his native element. As the steamer passed on her course, the serpent again emerged from the water, and leisurely directed his course Southward" (Anonymous, 1850b).

When the *William Seabrook* returned to Charleston, a correspondent for the *Charleston Courier* had an opportunity to speak with witnesses who saw the sea serpent. The story they told was virtually the same as that reported immediately after the event in the Savannah newspapers. "The object was approached to within about thirty feet, and many on board the steamer had a good view of it, as it lay in about four and a half fathoms water, and at one time, moving sufficiently to create a ripple, when it disappeared, but was again seen, for a short time, in the wake of the steamer. It is represented, by some of the passengers with whom we conversed, to be some hundred and fifty feet in length, with a body of enormous bulk, and a head about the size of a hog-head, and resembling, in appearance that of the alligator. The monster was not at all, 'like a whale'" (Anonymous, 1850c).

As soon as news of the sea serpent surfaced, reports of an expedition to hunt down the strange animal began appearing in the media. One in particular was mounted amidst much frivolity by several individuals from Beaufort, who put together an expedition of two small boats armed with an assortment of weapons, including a small cannon. Nearly a week after Blankenship and his party saw the serpent, Captain John Barnwell and company headed onto the waters of Port Royal Sound and up Broad River, where rumors reported the monster to be stranded. This expedition of merry-makers of course did not find the sea serpent, but they did find four whales. Not wanting to face their neighbors' ribbing for returning empty handed, they attempted to kill a whale to bring back as a prize, but despite hitting the animal with a cannon shot and

several harpoons, were unsuccessful. Their explanation for trying to kill the whale instead of the sea serpent was that the sea serpent did not exist, and the sightings of the serpent, they contended, were merely sightings of these whales swimming single file (Anonymous, 1850f). But Blankenship and his party's original description of the animal made no mention of following a creature undulating in and out of the water mimicking the swimming pattern of whales and dolphins. In fact, their animal, which they approached to within thirty feet as they navigated completely around the beast, was reported emphatically as being, ". . . not at all, 'like a whale'" (Anonymous, 1850c).

Word of this hunt for the creature up the Broad River caught the attention of newspaper editors, and soon overshadowed the original reports of the sea serpent (Anonymous, 1850e; Anonymous, 1850f; Anonymous, 1850i). A fanciful account of Barnwell's hunt for the creature even made its way into a collection of short stories published by outdoor writer William Elliott in 1859 (Elliott, 1859). Most publications began treating the event as a humorous episode, while scientific publications in Europe ridiculed the event (Anonymous, 1850j; Newman, 1850). Even the famous sea serpent researchers A.C. Oudemans and Bernard Heuvelmans became confused by the misleading accounts and proclaimed the whole episode a hoax based on the encounter with the whale on March 16th, and not on the original reports of Blankenship's sea serpent on March 10th. Ironically, they included mention of a second sighting of a sea serpent in the same waters a few years later, but an ignorance of the geography of the South Carolina and Georgia coast prevented them from realizing the connection (Oudemans, 1892; Heuvelmans, 1968).

The sea serpent was alive and well, and spotted in the waters near Beaufort just four years later. However, this time it was not in the waters of Port Royal Sound, but just a few miles north in St. Helena Sound. News of this sighting was shared with the outside world thanks to the timely visit to the area by a British traveler named Amelia Murray. She was on the court of Queen Victoria, and travelled extensively studying nature, especially botany and

geology. On one of her trips along the southeastern United States, Murray was a passenger aboard the steamer *Isabel*, en route from Charleston to Havana, Cuba. She made the acquaintance of the ship's captain, surnamed Rollins, who shared details about his own personal encounter with the sea serpent in 1854. The vessel *William Seabrook* was once again involved, but she was under the command of a different skipper, as Captain Blakenship had taken over the steamer *Seminole* in 1853, making regular trips between Savannah and various ports of call along the coast of Florida (Anonymous, 1853). He was replaced by a Captain Peat, who would later gain notoriety as a blockade runner during the War Between the States.

According to Rollins, Peat, his crew and the passengers on board the *William Seabrook* encountered the creature near the mouth of the Savannah River. They were not able to get their vessel as close to the creature as Blankenship had back in 1850, as the mysterious animal dove beneath the surface upon the approach of the ship.

The next day, the *Isabel* departed and followed along the same route as the *William Seabrook*. A year later, the captain regaled Ms. Murray with the story of what happened next. "Captain Rollins of this ship says, he, like the rest of the world, disbelieved the report; but the next day, during the passage of this steamer to Savannah, on approaching the bar at St. Helens, he was called by his look-out man to see 'the biggest log that ever was.' On looking through his telescope, he clearly saw that the object in question was no tree, but a monster as long as the *Isabel* herself, in rapid motion; as he watched it, it reared its snake-like body and head high out of the water as the funnel of the steamer, and looked about for an instant, and then plunged down, leaving a swirling eddy where it had shown itself" (Murray, 1856).

What happened to the creature in the years after this flurry of activity is unknown. Perhaps it made its way south along the coast to the waters around the Altamaha River, where regular sightings of mysterious sea creatures continue to be made. Whether there is a relationship between the Broad River sea serpent and other sea

serpents reported from the southeastern United States has never been determined.

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